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Photo by Jeremy Quigley

Nothing but Net

Donnie Johnson and Creighton started another NCAA dance to the tune of more sweet string music at the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament.

NEBRASKA SPORTS America

April 2000 • Volume 7 • No. 4

FEATURES

10 A Steady Climb
Admittedly no star prospect out of high school, Nebraska pitcher Scott Fries has worked his way into the role of workhorse on a Big 12 staff.
Story by Kalani Simpson Photos by Eric Francis

14 The Ultimate Husker Walk-on
Though he'd prefer to remain anonymous, Craig Bohl is about to enter the spotlight's glare, having worked his way up from reserve player to defensive coordinator at the University of Nebraska.
Story by Terry L. Henion NSA File Photo

18 Too Good to Pass Up
Jeanne Tostenson had the perfect situation as an assistant coach in Division 1. But when the UNO softball job opened up, it was a chance she had to take.
Photo by Eric Francis

20 Sudden Storm
Nobody saw him coming, but since his arrival in the lineup Vince Pietro has contributed mightily to the rebirth of Creighton baseball.
Story by Dennis Sexton Photo by Eric Francis

COVER STORY

24 Babe in Boy Land
Proof that there really is no such thing as a bad boy: Omaha's Boys Town held a soft spot in the heart of perhaps the most legendary ballplayer and rascal of them all, Babe Ruth.
Story by Kevin Warneke Photos Courtesy Boys Town Archives

32 Game Faces
Nebraska softball stars Jennifer Lizama and Leigh Suhr are the roughest, toughest, meanest, most tenacious competitors you could hope to find... and underneath that, two sweet young ladies.
Story by Kalani Simpson Photos by Eric Francis

34 A Hard Road to Glory
In the stands, on the mat, behind the scenes at the state wrestling tournament.
Story by Kalani Simpson Photos by Eric Francis

DEPARTMENTS

4 **Letter from the Editor**

6 **Athlete of the Month**

8 **Between the Lines**
By John Knicely

38 **Seeds of Excellence**
By Dr. Shawn Schmidt

42 **In the Stands**
With Terry L. Henion

On the Cover: Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig of the New York Yankees visit Father Flanagan's Boys Town; (inset) Nebraska pitcher Scott Fries.
Photos Courtesy Boys Town and by Eric Francis

LETTER from the editor

We're really happy with Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, and Father Flanagan for that matter, on our cover.

Mostly, so we don't look stupid.

You see, when you put somebody on your cover, you kind of hold your breath that nothing happens between the time you ship things off to the printer and the time the magazine comes out. Somebody could get hurt, or rob a bank or transfer or get benched, or, worst of all, might actually stop being the hot UNO goalie in favor of Kendall Sidoruk. (Oops! Poor Sid got short changed on covers two years in a row.) It's a bit of a gamble. After all, that thing can be staring at you for an awful long time from the newsstand. "Dewey Defeats Truman" comes to mind.

Father, Iron Horse and the Babe tend to eliminate the risk.

We do a lot of predicting. OK, guessing. Our schedules, deadlines and time frames are weird, in case you haven't noticed. We map out our magazine and assign everything about 2 to 3 weeks before all the photos, stories and ads come in for deadline. Then it takes about a week and a couple days to put it all together on the computer. Then we ship it down to Lincoln for the printer and wait, unbearably, for two weeks for it to come back as an actual magazine. Or actually, as we find out from time to time (like during the Christmas-New Year's doubleheader), that it's not a wait of two calendar weeks since we dropped it off, but (repeat after me) 10 working days. The pressmen have National Grape Jelly Day off? That's another day's delay.

But then we have magazines, right? Well, usually, *we* do. The rest of you get them as fast as the mail goes out, if we've remembered to send out that check to the post office. (Doh!) So then that's a day or two for Omaha and Lincoln and a couple more days in transit for you out of state subscribers, but, whew!, we've got magazines.

Except on the newsstand. For most places, they take another two weeks from that point in time to get from the shipment to the shelves. Don't ask me why. I could try to understand all that for you, but then my head would explode. It's worse than algebra, that whole mess. I think it has something to do with fractions...

And being a small business in the choke hold of Murphy's Law, we've occasionally lost another day here or there, often with computer problems or staff riots or an editor who's unconscious for several days at a time. You know, the kind of stuff that regularly goes on at Sports Illustrated.

But finally, approximately two months or more from our first ideas ("Hey! Let's put Babe Ruth on the cover!" "OK!") and five weeks since the stories were written, a month after the magazine is finished and out of our hands, it is on the newsstand.

There, my friend Jason Tiedtke runs out to buy it, excitedly flipping to this page to see what kind of gibberish I have written. From what I can tell, it's the only reason he buys the magazine, and he's got to be extremely disappointed with this month's offering. Which is why I've made this vain attempt at making it up to him by putting his name in it. You've got to reward customer loyalty where you can.

Anyway, it's been two months, Lou, Babe ... You guys are still famous, aren't you?

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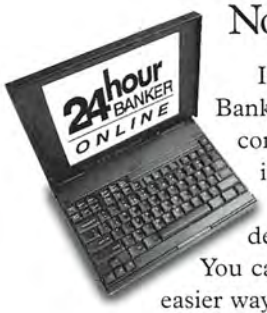

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ATHLETE of the month

South Sprinter Going for Two

Some consider the 400-meter dash one of the most grueling races in sport.

"You use all your energy, you go all out," explained state champion Donnell Deleon-Thompson of Omaha South. "It's a full sprint all the way around."

But with Deleon-Thompson, even a full sprint all the way around the entire oval track doesn't sound too taxing. At least not the way he puts it. "It's what I like," he said casually. "Nothing too long. Nothing too short."

There's more to it than that, assured South track coach Jay Ball. "He makes the head track coach's job pretty easy," Ball said, "because he's the hardest working guy on the team."

That's because Deleon-Thompson, a tall senior with a stride that eats up ground, eats up competition as well. He takes to track like a fish to water.

Deleon-Thompson had kept a watchful eye on Roncalli's Pat Belling at last year's state meet, knew Belling was one of the state's best. When Class B's finals were immediately before Deleon-Thompson's race in A, Belling's win in 48.86 seconds became the top time. Instantaneously, it became the goal.

"I was going for the gold," Deleon-Thompson said.

"He set the time, but I knew what I had to beat. I knew I had to get after it."

Deleon-Thompson said he was nervous. He had been thinking about this race all season. He wasn't just racing against the field, but against Belling as well. "That was in the back of my mind when I was running," he said. He broke the tape in 48.65, his fastest time all year.

The win was big. South, with athletic fortunes having dipped significantly from its glory days, now had a success story. "Coach told me we haven't had a gold state champion in 27 years," Deleon-Thompson said. "He told me if I win another one I could be a part of history."

So that's the goal. Ball, who had coached two-time gold winner and former state record holder Lionel McPhaull at North, thinks his runner can do it. Deleon-Thompson has excellent work habits, the coach said, and a very supportive family. And he has the body to do what his will tells it to.

"If he stays healthy, he could go 47 (seconds)," Ball said. "I don't have any doubt about it."

But it won't be as easy as Deleon-Thompson first let on, he admitted. The 400 is tough. He hits the wall halfway through. "Your legs...," he said. "You gotta hit the first 200 hard, and then your legs are killing and you just gotta suck it up and go." For 200 more meters.

But then the pain melts away, replaced by something far better. Deleon-Thompson said he loves the feeling after races. The feeling after that state championship race was best of all.

"I've just got that picture in my mind, standing up there again," he said of the gold medal stand. "Sometimes I don't feel like coming but I've got that picture in my mind." ✦ NSA

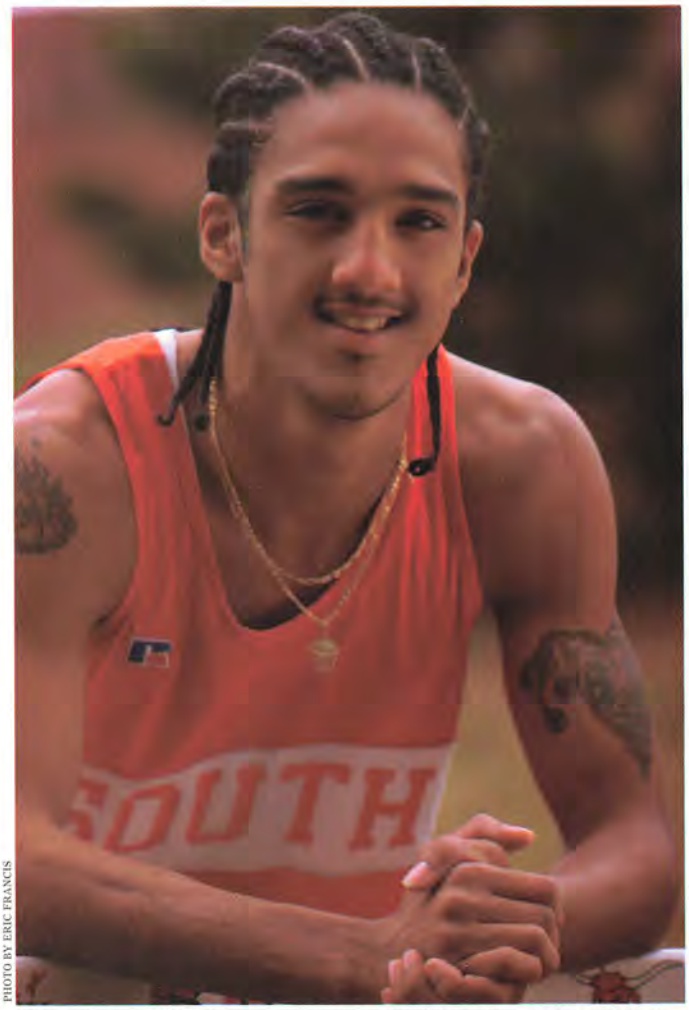

PHOTO BY ERIC FRANCIS

"It feels good," Deleon-Thompson said of bringing a championship to Omaha South

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BETWEEN the lines

BY JOHN KNICELY

Full Steam Ahead

Chances are you didn't hear about the recent winning streak of the Omaha Rebels, but it certainly deserves mention. The exceptional team of seventh- and eighth-graders chalked up 72 straight wins this school year, many by lopsided margins of 30 and 40 points.

The streak finally ended last month when an older group of ninth-graders prevailed in the championship game of a weekend tournament.

Ed St. Fleur is the high-energy coach of the Rebels, a select team that mirrors his personality with its unrelenting and focused style of play.

If the name St. Fleur sounds familiar, it's probably due to the fact he played for Dana Altman several years ago at Creighton. Now the former Bluejay is applying his version of the "94 feet of hell" basketball philosophy and, in the process, has tormented not only opposing players, but also their parents. I know from experience, having watched my son's team struggle to merely advance the ball past the half-court line.

It seems even a lead of 20 points it not enough to satisfy St. Fleur. The Rebels' smothering full-court press rolls on without mercy.

One exasperated parent-coach told me he asked LeFleur during a game to teach his players sportsmanship by pulling back instead of pouring it on with an already insurmountable lead. LeFleur suggested, in return, that the same parent-coach teach his team how to break a press.

When the referee also raised an eyebrow, the press was scrapped for a half-court zone trap that sparked a new wave of steals and fast-break baskets. The athletic Rebels are simply coached to play hard.

Coach St. Fleur (top right) and his champion Rebels.

Those who grumble in the stands might be less critical if they knew more about St. Fleur's motivation. He's determined to pass along the same resolve he learned by necessity as a child.

Home is near Atlanta, where St. Fleur was one of five children in a dysfunctional family fathered by an alcoholic. St. Fleur said he realized early in life that he was on his own.

He noticed the parents of his teammates in the stands during youth basketball games, but never spotted his father. St. Fleur painfully remembered that "my Daddy only came to one game throughout my entire career." Adding to the hurt is the fact his mother was so distant she never bothered to meet Dana Altman when St. Fleur signed to attend Creighton.

Today's society is filled with misfits who point to similar circumstances as an excuse for their wayward behavior. As a youngster, St. Fleur made up his mind not to venture down those same dismal paths.

Instead, he slapped on a personal full-court press and dictated his life's direction by purposely making "good decisions." He's gone all out ever since.

Basketball filled the void caused by neglect and now the game serves as St. Fleur's method of providing positive influence for young people. The season's ups and occasional downs serve as character builders that are reinforced by his continued demand that his players strive to be the best.

When St. Fleur was the same age, he had opportunity to measure his skills against the likes of Bobby Hurley and Jason Kidd. The Rebels will have similar opportunity.

Even though the team already has played more than 70 games, the season isn't even half over. By next August, the Rebels will have played nearly 200 games, including tournament appearances against some of the nation's best in Florida, Minnesota and Missouri.

That sparkling 72-1 record is sure to lose some of its luster but only because the majority of the remaining games will be against teams with older players. Now that the high school season is over, St. Fleur is able to schedule ninth-grade competition for his younger squad.

When the next school year begins, the current Rebel squad will disband, as most of the players head for different high schools. The coaches at Creighton Prep, North and Central may be sending thank-you notes to St.Fleur.

And a warning for parents who will have boys playing in Omaha's sixth-grade select leagues next fall: Use the summer months ahead to teach your sons how to break a full-court press. Otherwise your worst basketball nightmare is almost guaranteed.

The same high-energy coach is making plans to unleash a new team of Rebels.✣ NSA

John Knicely is co-anchor at WOWT (Channel 6) in Omaha.

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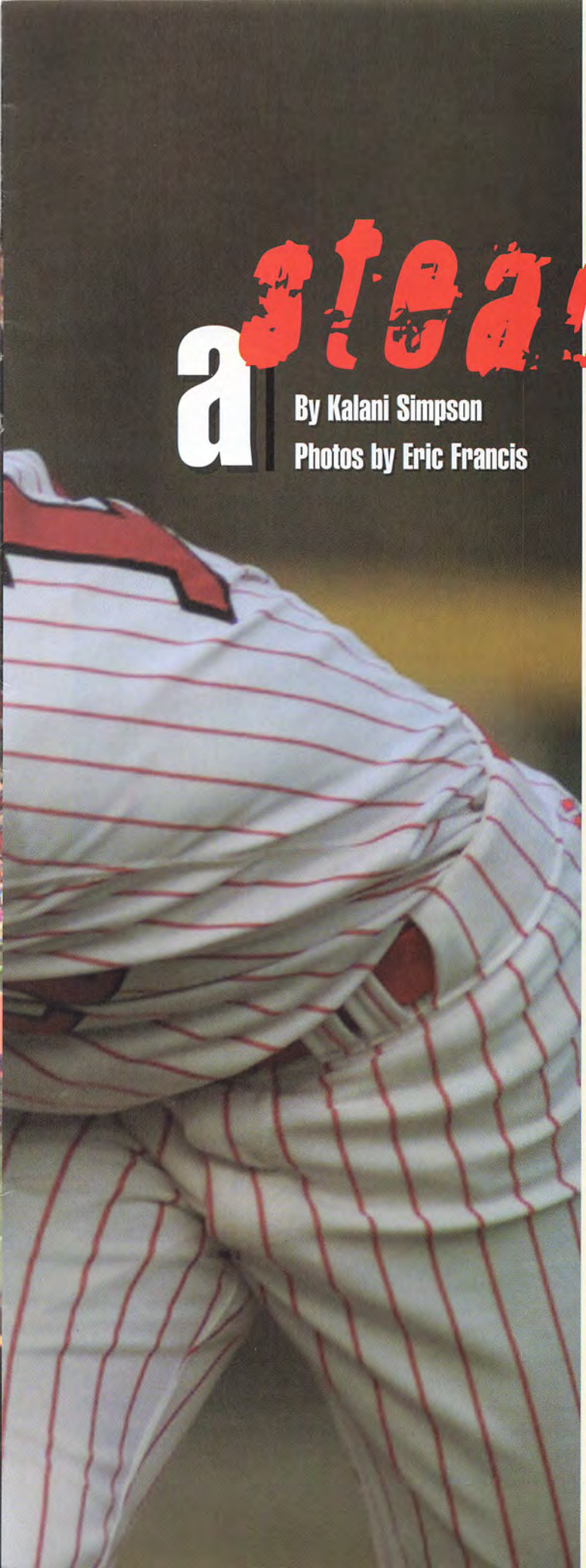
a steady climb

By Kalani Simpson

Photos by Eric Francis



Admittedly no star prospect out of high school, Nebraska pitcher Scott Fries has worked his way into the role of workhorse on a Big 12 staff

Nebraska pitcher Scott Fries, who eventually went on to beat No. 8 Texas and No. 9 Baylor, and got the start against No. 2 Rice last season, wasn't really recruited by any big schools coming out of Centura High School. He knows why.

"When I started out," he said, "I wasn't that good."

But after two straight American Legion state tournaments, including a runner-up finish, Fries wasn't ready to give up playing baseball. So he went to Peru State ... and did OK. Then, he followed his college coach to Coffeyville Community College in Kansas ... and did OK. And despite his 4-5 record at Coffeyville, it was obvious that Fries was getting better and better ... Hey, this guy was OK!

He had learned a little from each coach, gotten a little better at each stop, Fries said. (And besides, he was a lefty.) And so home state, Division I Nebraska came calling. Fries was happy to come aboard. Almost immediately, he did OK.

As in leading the Husker staff in innings pitched.

OK in the Big 12 is pretty darn good.

Especially when you consider that Fries struck out 14 Jayhawks in a start against Kansas. Or went the distance against national powerhouses in the aforementioned games against Rice and Texas.

After allowing a two-run homer to start the Texas contest, Fries settled down to sit down 19 straight Longhorn batters. And following that ice-breaker, a crucial first-day victory led by Fries, the Huskers went on to take two more over the weekend from Texas, a historic sweep.

Fries became the Husker workhorse that year, going 8-7

in 15 starts, one of only six in Nebraska history to pitch more than 100 innings in a single season. He got the nod as the pitcher of record in two NCAA tournament games.

Not bad. Not bad at all.

"Coach said, it didn't matter if you were new or old. If you could come in and play, you were going to play," Fries said.

So Fries played, the Nebraska starter on opening day. And the Huskers, with no small amount of help from national player of the year finalist Ken Harvey, won the Big 12 Tournament (Fries got the win in the final, a 4-3 nailbiter against No. 9 Baylor) and swept their way into the NCAAs. With most everyone back this season, except Harvey of course, the Huskers opened the 2000 campaign with higher expectations.

And Fries on the mound as their No. 1.

At least that was Coach Dave Van Horn's plan. Van Horn said Fries is extremely mentally tough, simply, a guy a team can trust. Van Horn wanted to lead off his rotation with Fries, the rock.

"He just doesn't get rattled out there," the coach explained.

But a funny thing happened. The guys were playing cards in the hotel room during the season's first road trip, and Fries, not wanting to interrupt the game, politely cut across the room by walking along the edge of the bed. Then he hopped to the floor, rolled his foot on his sandal, and promptly broke something. A fracture in his foot, out two to four weeks. Try going to your coach and telling that story.

"Yeah," Fries said. Don't have to tell him how it sounds. "Yeah, what'd you really do?" No. 1 pitcher falls in hotel room. Sure.

Luckily, it was early.

"We'll take advantage of this injury to get some of our younger pitchers some experience, and we'll hope that Fries comes back stronger than he was in his first outing," Van Horn said.

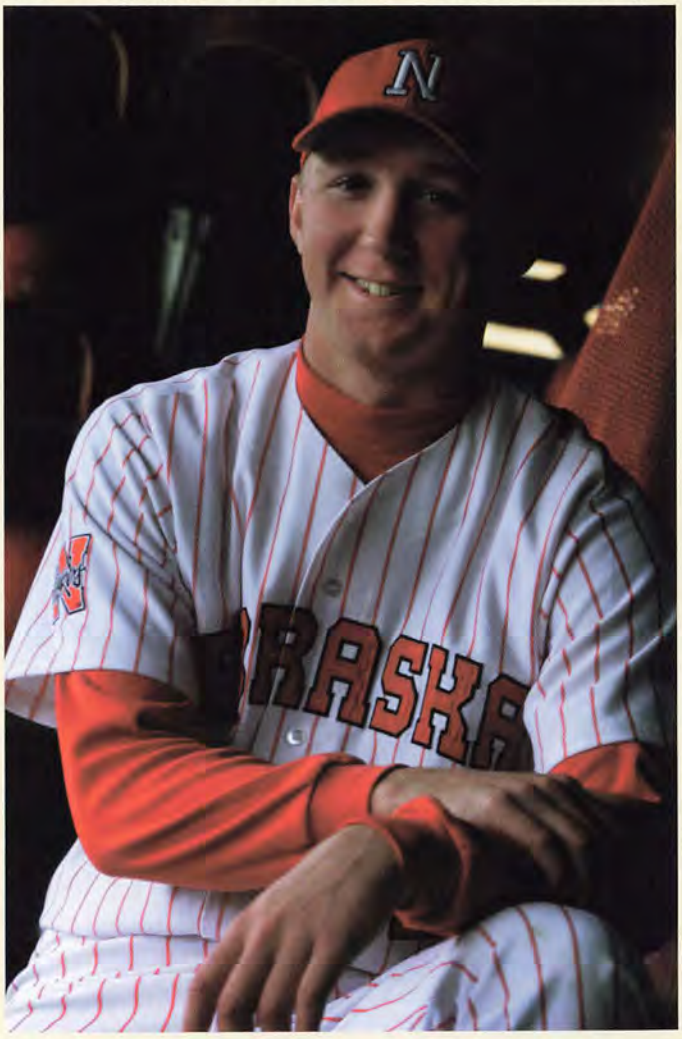
Shane Komine was Big 12 Freshman of the Year in 1999. Van Horn is raving about freshman lefty Jamie Rodrigue. And if Fries is steady, then fellow senior Chad Wiles has style. Wiles wasn't able to be the workhorse Fries was last season, but the Wood River native picked his spots, going 5-1 on the year and being named to the All-Big 12 Tournament team and National Player of the Week for a win and a save in the tourney.

The Huskers aren't hurting for pitching. Take your time, Scott.

Fries had climbed his way from being OK at Peru to being the first option on a Big 12 staff, only to trip over a card game in a hotel room. "Now," he said, "I have to work my way back."

It's a shorter trip now. Fries threw about 76 miles per hour coming out of high school. Now he clocks in at 87. He's added a fourth pitch for his senior season, giving him a fastball, curveball and slider to go with his best offering, the change-up. Assistant coach Rob Childress helped him develop the change, Fries said, and that's one reason he can now pitch in the Big 12 Conference. "It's my best pitch by far," Fries said.

After an early injury, Fries was all smiles for his comeback outing.



It's another thing he's picked up along his travels. Peru, Coffeyville, Lincoln. "Oh, I'm a lot better now," he said. "Just learning stuff from different coaches helps, too. Every little bit helps."

So he's looking at his broken foot as a setback, yes, but a minor one. By the time you read this, barring another catastrophic card game, Fries should be back on the mound for the Huskers in some capacity, back pitching in the Big 12. And the conference should be forewarned: An entire offseason has come and gone. And Scott Fries, for the first time since American Legion ball, is no longer the new guy. Familiar, comfortable and back on the team he left off with.

"I actually knew what to expect," he said of this season, "coming back to the same league."

Two years in a row? He might improve even more than usual.✦ NSA

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March 25	Missouri	1 pm
March 26	Missouri	1 pm
March 28	Colorado St.	5, 7 pm
March 29	Colorado St.	5, 7 pm
March 30	Wichita St.	6, 8 pm
April 8	Baylor	4:30 pm
April 9	Baylor	1 pm
April 11	Missouri-KC	4, 6 pm
April 18	Iowa State	4:30 pm
April 19	Creighton	7 pm
April 25	Drake	2, 4 pm
April 26	Wisconsin	1, 3 pm
April 29	Texas	5 pm
April 30	Texas	1 pm
May 5	Kansas	6, 8 pm

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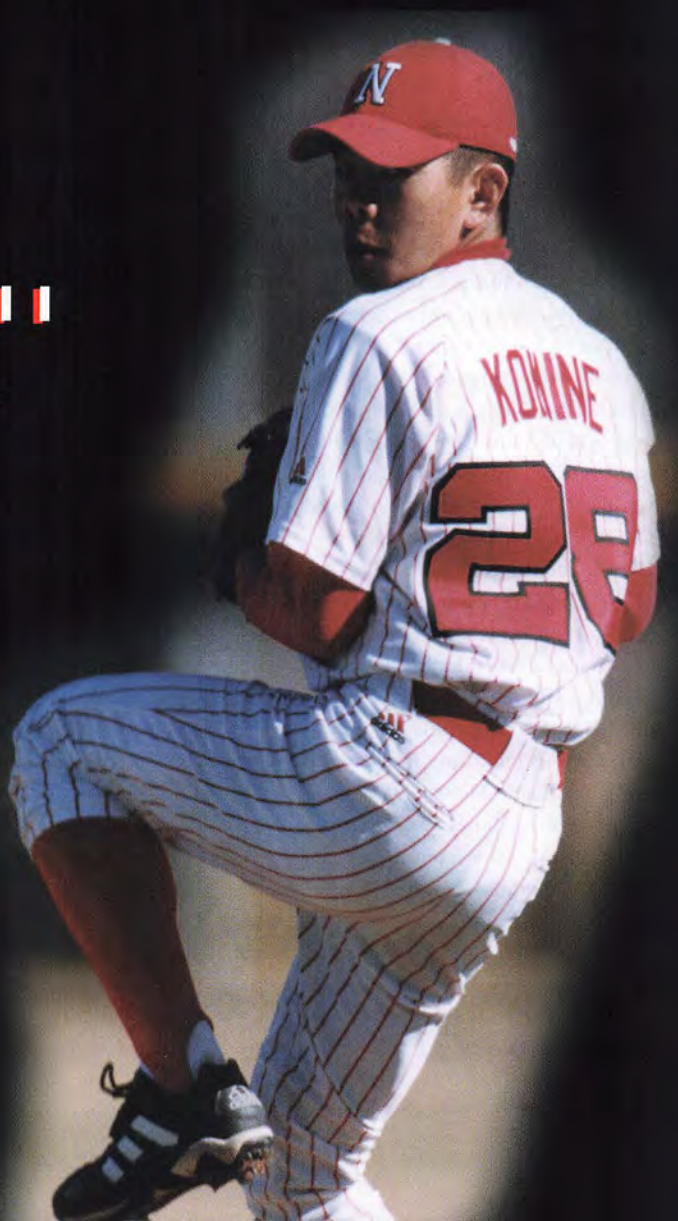


baseball

March 7	Nebraska-Omaha, 1-9	2 pm
March 17	Oklahoma, 1-9	6:30 pm
March 18	Oklahoma, 1-9	2 pm
March 19	Oklahoma, 1-9	1 pm
March 24	Texas Tech, 1-9	6:30 pm
March 25	Texas Tech, 1-9	2 pm
March 26	Texas Tech, 1-9	1 pm
March 28	North Dakota St., 1-9	3 pm
April 4	NW Missouri St., 1-9	6 pm
April 7	Kansas, 1-9	6:30 pm
April 8	Kansas, 1-9	2 pm
April 9	Kansas, 1-9	1 pm
April 11	Creighton, 1-9	6:30 pm
April 18	Western Illinois, 1-9	7 pm
April 19	Western Illinois, 1-9	3 pm
April 21	Texas A&M, 1-9	6:30 pm
April 22	Texas A&M, 1-9	2 pm
April 24	UW-Milwaukee (DH)	4, 7 pm
April 25	UW-Milwaukee	2 pm
April 28	Iowa State, 1-9	6:30 pm
April 29	Iowa State, 1-9	2 pm
April 30	Iowa State, 1-9	1 pm
May 9	Northern Iowa,1-9	6:30 pm
May 12	Fresno State, 1-9	6:30 pm
May 13	Fresno State, 1-9	2 pm
May 14	Fresno State, 1-9	1 pm

pigskin Passion

THE ULTIMATE HUSKER WALK-ON

Though he'd prefer to remain anonymous, Craig Bohl is about to enter the spotlight's glare, having worked his way up from reserve player to defensive coordinator at the University of Nebraska

BY TERRY L. HENION

He might be the least recognizable high-profile man in the state of Nebraska, but that's about to change. Craig Bohl, the newly named defensive coordinator for the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers, now finds himself out of the shadows and caught squarely in the glare of the limelight.

Bohl, who served five years as the Huskers' linebackers coach, was chosen to replace venerable Charlie McBride as the coordinator of Nebraska's vaunted "attack" 4-3 defensive unit after McBride retired following the 1999 season.

McBride ended a 23-year career at Nebraska, including the last 18 when he patrolled the Husker sideline as the scowling defensive coordinator.

And while there are many things about Bohl that Husker fans probably don't know, there is one thing they should know: He is not Charlie McBride.

"I am going to be me and I am going to coach exactly the same way that I've always coached," Bohl said. "I want to see aggressiveness, intensity and concentration. I want to see team play. I want what we do to be a complete 'team' effort."

Hmmmmm ... Bohl may not be Charlie McBride, but he sure sounds like him. "The way things have been successful here, the way we do things, probably won't change much at all," he said. "Why should they?"

Indeed. But more about that later....

First and foremost, Husker fans should know that Bohl is one of them, the born and bred Nebraska fan who always bled Scarlet and Cream, no matter where he was.

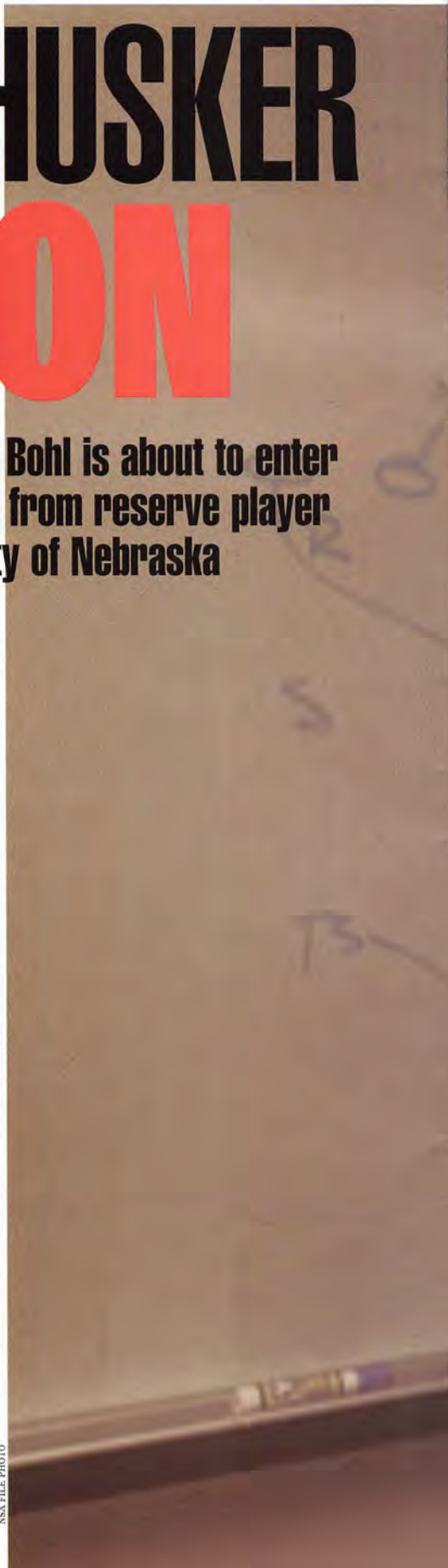
Bohl, 41, graduated from Lincoln East High School and played football for the Huskers from 1977-79. He graduated from Nebraska in 1981 with a bachelor's degree in business administration and met his wife Deanna there.

She also is a Nebraska grad. The couple has three children, twin daughters, Mallory and Morgan, and son. Aaron.

On the field — and let's be honest here — he was a marginally talented player at best. Bohl, a defensive back, never accumulated enough playing time to earn a letter. He was one of those players whose name gets spoken over the stadium loudspeaker only once a career — prior to the kickoff at the annual Senior Day game, traditionally the final home game of every season.

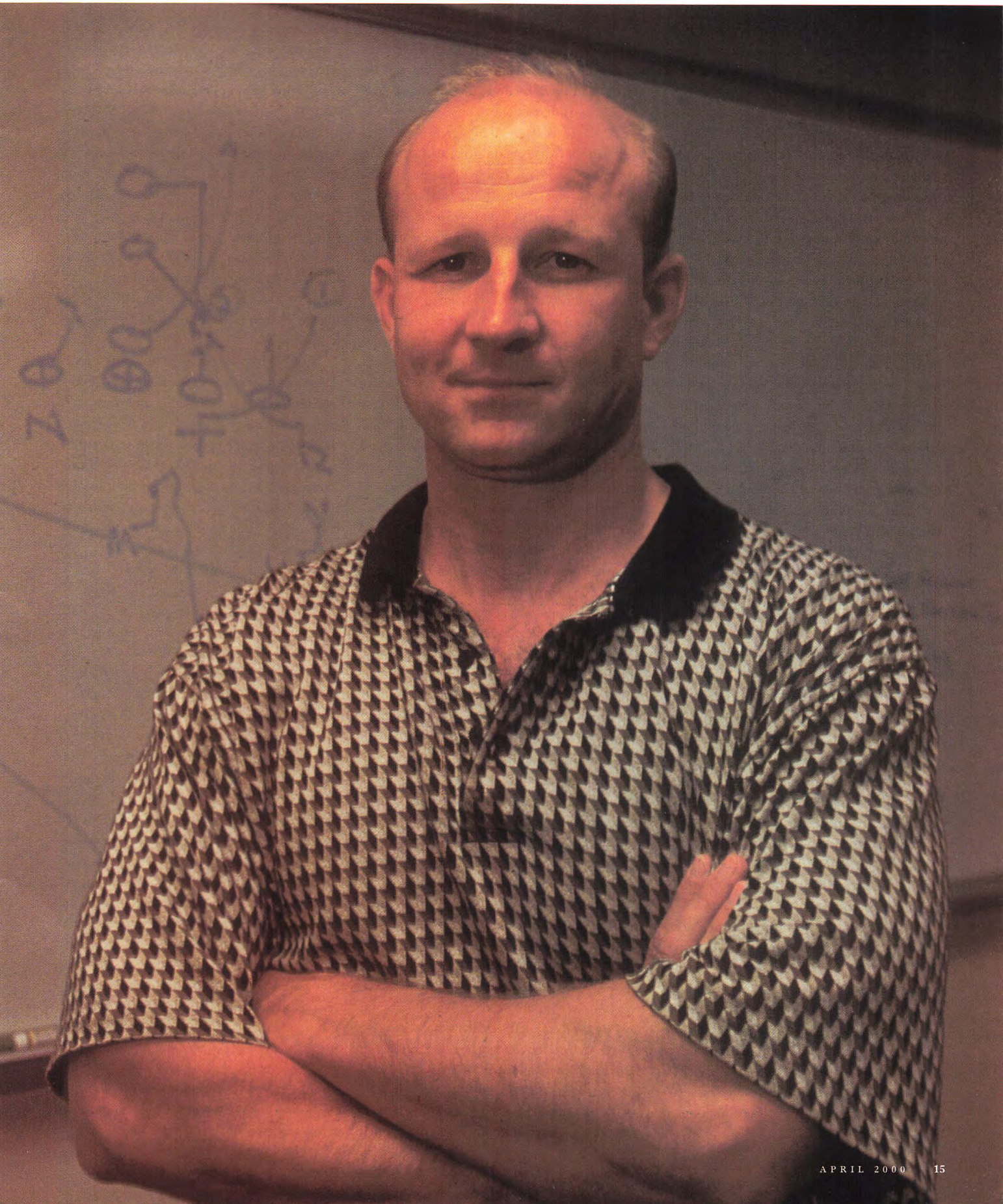
"Yeah, except that I missed Senior Day," Bohl said, chuckling. "I was injured and didn't even suit up."

But during his "career" as a Nebraska player, Bohl did soak up everything when it came to the Xs and Os part. And somewhere along the way, he began to tinker with the idea of coaching. During his senior



NSA FILE PHOTO

pigskin **Passion**



year, Coach Tom Osborne approached Bohl with the idea of becoming a graduate assistant and working with the freshmen. Bohl jumped at the chance.

From there, his career became clear: He would be a football coach.

"I had always respected my coaches and thought they had a great job," he said. "It was something that I knew I wanted to try."

After serving two years as an NU grad assistant, Bohl went to North Dakota State in 1984 as a defensive backs coach. He then went to Tulsa for two years to coach linebackers and moved to the University of Wisconsin in 1987, also as linebackers coach. After two years with the Badgers, Bohl was named defensive coordinator at Rice University and stayed there for four years before becoming defensive coordinator at Duke in 1994. One year later, Osborne called on Bohl again.

"I had always stayed in touch with the Nebraska coaches and people back home," Bohl said. "I was always a Husker, no matter where I was. People knew that. At Duke, we were preparing for our own bowl game when Nebraska finally beat Miami in the Orange Bowl. People were coming up to me and congratulating me on the Huskers' win."

Bohl quickly accepted Osborne's offer to return to Lincoln. During his five years as the linebackers' coach, his players have earned a reputation for being fast, smart and aggressive and, not coincidentally, the Husker defense has solidly cemented itself among the nation's elite.

When McBride decided to retire, Coach Frank Solich wasted little time in announcing Bohl as the replacement.

"Frank moved very quickly on that and I think it was a good thing," Bohl said. "We didn't lose any time as far as preparation for the upcoming season."

Bohl, though, is not quite comfortable yet with the idea of being the "quarterback" of the defense and the public scrutiny that will bring. He prefers to describe himself as "just one of the coaches" and goes out of his way to stress how he hopes fans will not view him as the "boss" of the other defensive coaches.

"I want to make this very clear — everything we do will be done as a team around here," Bohl said.

But he also knows that come Sunday mornings, win or lose, the play of Nebraska's defense and his coaching decisions will be scrutinized and second-guessed from one end of the state to the other.

"I know that in a big game, when it comes down to a crucial third-and-4 situation late in the game, the call will be mine," Bohl said. "That just goes with the territory."

So, with that in mind, NSA had a few questions for the new defensive coordinator.

NSA: When you returned to Lincoln five years ago, was there anything about the program that came as a surprise?

Bohl: I was amazed at how many players on the team were so fast. When I played here, we always had five or six who could really run. But now, my gosh, there isn't hardly a player on the team who is not fast and we have quite a few who are really fast. Speed, especially the way we play defense, is essential. We have numerous guys who can run with anybody and move and explode.

NSA: Who has been the most influential person in your coaching career?

Bohl: I learned a great deal from Coach Osborne and Coach McBride, of course. But the time I spent with Fred Goldsmith at Rice and then at Duke was very instrumental. I was 28 at the time he named me a defensive coordinator, a job that Fred had done for 16 years. So, Fred was a very good mentor for me.

NSA: As the defensive coordinator, will you be on the sideline or up in the booth? Fans have gotten used to seeing Charlie McBride on the field.

Bohl: I've always been up in the press box, but, to tell the truth, that hasn't been decided yet. It probably isn't that big of a deal, is it?

NSA: Well, yeah it is. Nebraska fans will want to know. Ask Coach Solich if it was a big deal for the fans when he came down from the box.

Bohl: I know that will happen, but it is better than the alternative. Our fans here at Nebraska are so involved. At other places I've coached, we might win a big game and nobody even cared. It sure isn't that way here.

NSA: You have coached at other big schools. What separates Nebraska football from the rest?

Bohl: One of the biggest things here is that the players and coaches push each other so hard to excel. No place else that I've been did that happen. Every year, we have seniors who just step up and pull the team with them. Last season it was the Browns, Mike and Ralph, and Steve Warren and those other great seniors. When Mike and Ralph were freshmen, they never said a word, not a sound. But as seniors, they were just true leaders. The same thing with Jason Peter and Grant Wistrom a few years ago. And it happens every single year. Our seniors just want so badly to carry on the tradition. It is something to watch.

NSA: Technically, you are the boss of the defense now. Explain how the process will work.

Bohl: First, let me say that all of the defensive coaches have equal input. George Darlington, Nelson Barnes and now Jeff Jamrog, we all will decide what is best for the team in a given situation. I can't emphasize that enough. I think it is fortunate that I have worked as a defensive coordinator before. It would have been much tougher to take this position without having done that. Now I sort of know what is expected.

NSA: You mean those critical 'third-and-4' situations?

Bohl: In those situations, it is my call, yes. Sometimes you stop 'em, but now and then they will get the first down. My wife says that is OK, but it is when they make it on a "third-and-18" that drives her nuts.

NSA: Every team develops the personality of its head coach and so does every defense of its defensive coordinator. What will be this team's defensive personality?

Bohl: I can guarantee you that we will play with intensity and reckless abandon, just as we always have. Countless coaches ask us how we manage to get our guys to play so hard all the time, every play. We want that to continue. We will set very high standards and goals again. I have deep commitment to our players and coaches on a personal level. And my philosophy is pretty simple: Do the best you can and if the ball bounces the other way once in a while, and fans get upset, well, that's the nature of the position. You just get ready for the next play, the next game.

NSA: What should Husker fans know about Craig Bohl that perhaps they don't?

Bohl: I am a Nebraska guy. Always was and always will be, no matter where I am. ✧ NSA

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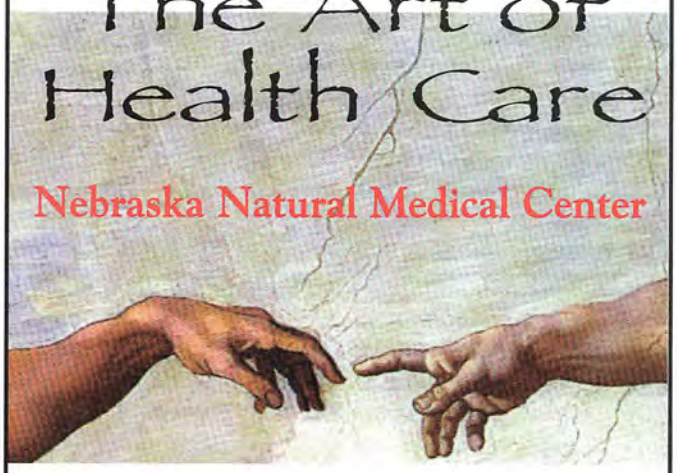

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too good to pass up

Jeanne Tostenson had the perfect situation as an assistant coach in Division 1. But when the UNO softball job opened up, it was a chance she had to take

In her final season of three years as an assistant softball coach at Illinois-Chicago — that's Division I Illinois-Chicago — Jeanne Tostenson helped the Flames reach the NCAA Tournament. UIC finished with a top-10 national ranking that season, 1999, after winning 67 games, an NCAA record. It was a wonderful program to be a part of.

Who could leave that?

But all that success became the key to some very intriguing doors. And Tostenson decided she owed it to herself to step inside and take a look around.

"I think one thing with coaching," she said, sitting at her desk in the UNO softball head coach's office. "Once you close that door, it might not ever open again."

And so, Tostenson used that miracle season from the wonderful Division I program as a springboard, leaping away from her safe comfort zone as the hot young assistant coach and into the responsibility of the head job at UNO.

It was an unexpected, exciting, bittersweet move. A head coach so soon? The chance surprised even her. Back down to Division II? The UNO job was a gem. Leaving her players, the ones she had recruited and mentored and been their big sister? That hurt, yes it did.

But it was, as the cliche goes, an offer she couldn't refuse. It was a chance that had to be taken. A career ladder that just doesn't come along very often ... or sometimes, at all. Could she live with letting it pass on by?

"I knew that somebody was going to take this job," Tostenson said. "And you don't know if they're ever going to let this one go again."

The softball world was shocked when Mary Yori, the Mavericks' all-time winning coach, suddenly stepped down at the end of last season. Yori had taken the Mavericks to four NCAA finals appearances in 11 years as coach. Four North Central Conference titles. Ten years in a row of qualifying for the postseason. The program was humming along, competing nationally, contending for the title year in and year out in one of the best conferences in the country. And Yori left the 2000 cupboard full to boot.

Tostenson, a former All-NCC player for Augustana, knew what a good situation UNO was and couldn't justify not taking the job. But she was the second UIC assistant to ride the magic season to head coaching duties, and the Flames felt burned.

It hit Tostenson hard as well, she said.

"It was real disappointing calling them (her players) on the phone," she said. "They almost felt like they were getting punished for having a good year."

It hurt. It was tough. But Tostenson made her decision and stuck with it. Now, the former Augustana Viking is thinking UNO.

"It was weird at first, putting on the red and black," she said. It's also weird at first being the final word on a team. Some things Tostenson took to right away, such as recruiting, which she calls her strength. Other things, like the spotlight, the transition of going from assistant to head coach, she's growing into as she goes.

Adjusting in mid-leap.

But she's happy she made it. Tostenson went as far as the runner-up finish in the Division II national finals with Augustana in 1993. She wants to get back and finish the job. UNO is one of a handful of schools, Division I or Division II, that can win a national championship, she said. That's why she couldn't turn it down. That's why she's a head coach here, and now.

That's why she made the jump. ◆ NSA

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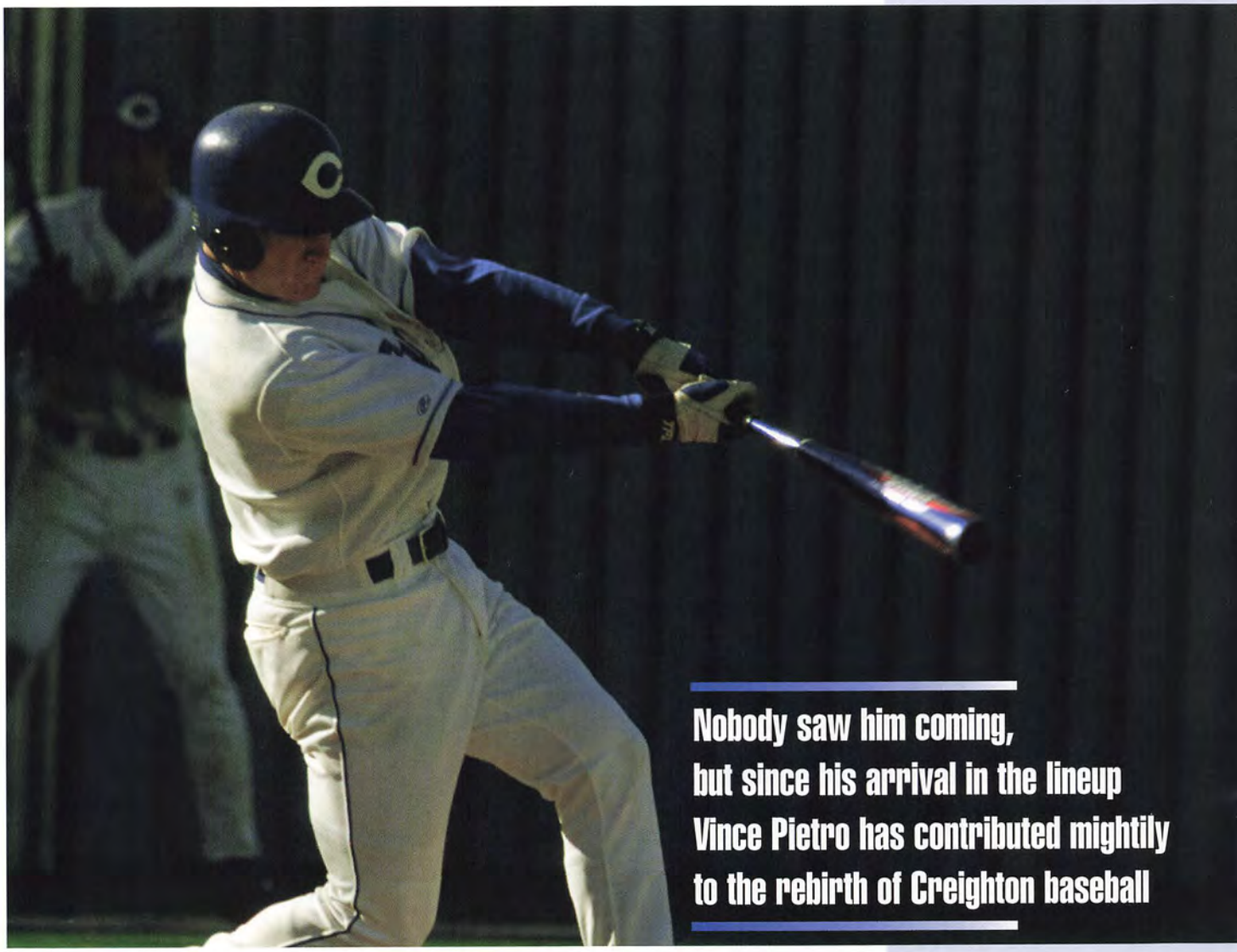

Nobody saw him coming, but since his arrival in the lineup Vince Pietro has contributed mightily to the rebirth of Creighton baseball

By Dennis Sexton

sudden Storm

Vince Pietro is to baseball scouts what a surprise blizzard is to a weatherman — a nightmare.

In fact, he's the perfect example of the futility of each profession. Even with a radar gun and stopwatch, satellite imagery and computer models, it all still comes down to an educated guess. You never know what the next player or next day might bring.

Consider that no one wanted Vince Pietro. Coming out of Creighton Prep high school, he was largely unrecruited and certainly not projected to develop into what he is today — a two-time co-captain and All-Missouri Valley Conference second baseman for a team, that just two years ago, was struggling for an identity.

Where would Creighton baseball be today without the walk-on who, as Pietro puts it, "was just looking for an opportunity to play some ball"?

Creighton certainly knows where it stands with him.

"He's the type of player that's important to have on your team, especially when the program struggled like it did for a few years," Creighton Coach Jack Dahm said. "Vince

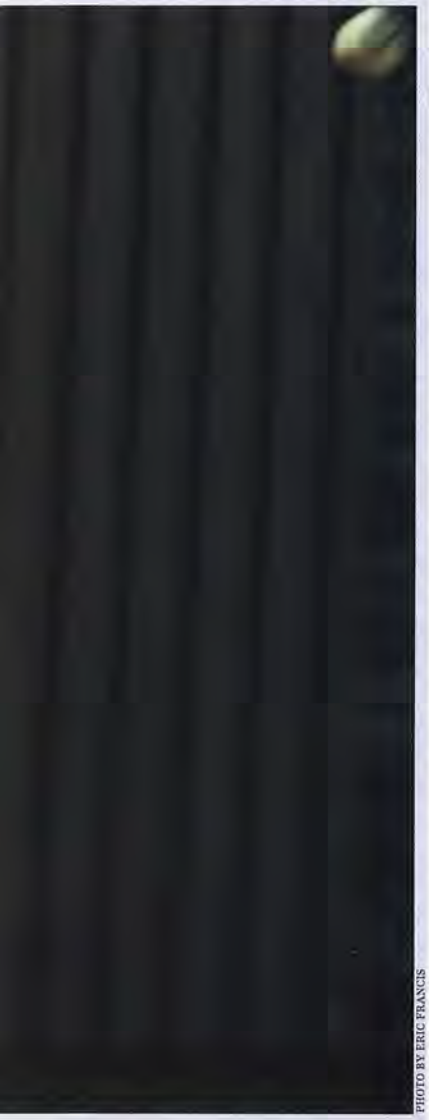

PHOTO BY ERIC FRANCIS

is a winner and helped to change the attitude. He's one of the guys who took ownership of this program again."

Success had eluded the Creighton baseball team during the mid-'90s and the Jays were having a difficult time finding the ingredients to turn things around. No one could have envisioned that Pietro would be one of the biggest keys.

"He didn't play at all for the first 20 games or so (of his freshman season)," Dahm said. "Then our shortstop does something that gets himself pulled (from the game); I put Vince in there and he gets two hits, including the game-winner, and makes a couple of plays on defense ... he's been in the lineup ever since."

Huh? How does that happen?

"I made the most of my opportunity," Pietro understated.

Pietro was ready when called upon because he worked his tail off — and he still does — Dahm said. Pietro's practice habits are near legend in CU baseball circles.

"Vince has set the standard for working hard. I will probably never have a player who is as unselfish and works as hard as he does — I'm talking of all my time as a player and everyone I have coached or will coach," Dahm said. "We almost take for him granted — (assistant coach Ed Servais) and I sometimes sit back at practice and watch in amazement at how hard he works.

"You can never underestimate him. He has incredible determination and does everything the way it's supposed to be done. He's a self-made baseball player who has turned himself into one of the best second basemen in the country."

Luckily, Pietro can't see it because he's got his nose stuck to the grindstone.

"I don't know that I am (one of the best), but if people want to classify me in those terms, it's a great honor," Pietro said. "I was taught to play the game as hard as I can every day; (my success) is a credit to the work I've put in."

Pietro's focus is contagious, Dahm said, citing a total team work ethic. Good thing, because this year, hoping to capitalize on the expectations that come with an NCAA Tournament bid, Creighton needs its best effort from everyone. The Bluejays face the challenge associated with losing a pair of All-Americans in third baseman Ryan Gripp and pitcher/designated hitter Peyton Lewis. The duo accounted for 171 hits, 160 runs-batted-in, and 43 home runs — not to mention the 10 wins Lewis picked up on the mound.

And the Jays are still talking MVC championship.

"Not one player can pick up the slack. We need everybody to play better than they did last year, whether that's everybody hitting a couple more home runs or getting 10 more runs-batted-in," Dahm said. "We can't put the pressure all on one guy. We need everybody to step up and perform."

Don't misunderstand the coach. This is no rebuilding season. An outstanding veteran nucleus remains, with a deep pitching staff and a lineup full of two- and three-year starters.

"We realize we don't have any superstars this season," Pietro said. "A lot of different guys need to step up in key roles. It's going to take a team effort — we need to be aggressive every day if we're going to be successful and win games."

The Jays started 2000 hot. With 15 wins through its first 16 games, Creighton sprinted to its best start ever; the old mark was set in 1991, coincidentally, the last time Creighton played in a College World Series.

Included among the early wins were victories over Pacific-10 Conference power Washington, and Big 12 Conference members Kansas and Kansas State.

The schedule reflects how far Creighton has come in a few short years. Even in February and March, the Jays are playing for May and June.

"We want to do well against the Big 12 and bigger conferences and have a good record against the good leagues so when it comes around to tournament time, we have a better chance for an at-large bid," Dahm said. "With the guys we had returning, we thought we could have a very successful season, but, you know, we hadn't sat down and thought about what our record would be early on."

In other words, it's a nice start but they've got a long way to go. Something the seniors of a year ago were sure to pass on to this year's squad. And Pietro, forever focused, hopes to continue in the rediscovered tradition.

"We had some great seniors last year ... key guys that really helped this (year's) team by setting an example," Pietro said. "This year's seniors have tried to carry over that leadership and show the younger guys what it might take to play at this level. Hopefully, they can learn from the example we set."

This spring, Pietro set a furious example, breaking out of the winter doldrums with a torrid start. The kind of numbers that, if sustained, might just catch the eye of one of those scouts out there. Exactly the way Lewis and Gripp did a year ago.

But that's got nothing to do with the MVC standings, with working, with winning...

"Right now, I just want to concentrate on our team and help us have some success," Pietro said. "But if I have an opportunity to play at the next level, I'll weigh all the factors and make a decision then."

If Pietro takes that chance, he just might provide a scout somewhere a good night's sleep. This time, they'll see him coming on the Doppler Radar from miles away. ❖ NSA

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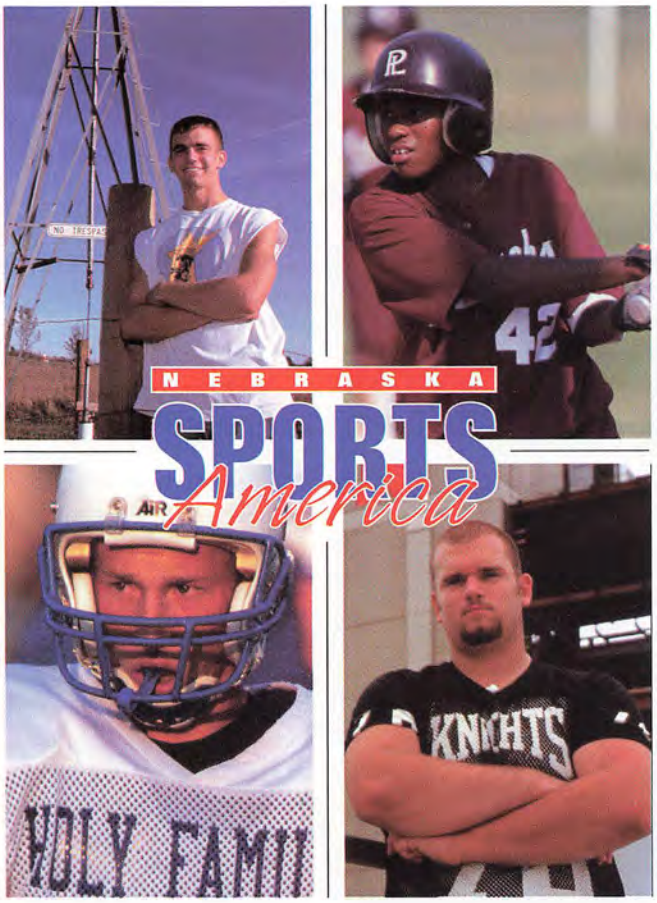

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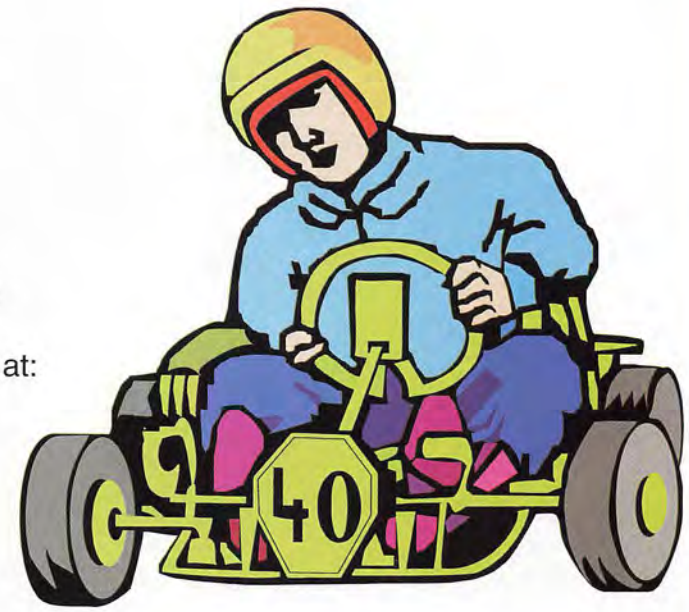


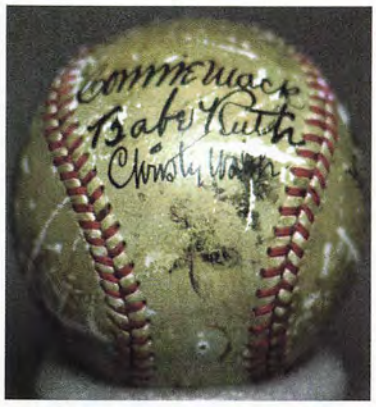
alternative corporate entertainment

Even in ill health, Ruth insisted on visiting Boys Town and his friend, Father Flanagan (right).

Proof that there really is no such thing as a bad boy: Omaha's Boys Town held a soft spot in the heart of perhaps the most legendary ballplayer and rascal of them all, Babe Ruth

BABE in Boy Land

By Kevin Warneke • Photos Courtesy Boys Town Archives



The King of Swat was coming to Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, and any Boys Town boy who wanted to hear him speak needed to be in the old grade-school gymnasium.

Word spread on that day in November 1947 — even to the Boys Town farm. "I was surprised word got to us," recalled Anthony Hurtado, a 1954 Boys Town graduate. "But I was glad it did."

Hurtado figured he needed to hear what the Babe had to say — because the two had something in common. "We both grew up in an orphanage."

While Ruth's words were predictable, they resonated with Hurtado. "He told us to hang in there, get our heads on straight and things would work out," Hurtado recalled.

Those words, which 400 Boys town boys heard that day, turned out to be advice from a dying man. Nine months later, Ruth would die of throat cancer.

Ruth's visit in 1947 was one of many by sports stars who came to Boys Town at Father Flanagan's request. They came because Flanagan asked them to, and they came because they knew every boy deserved a chance to make something out of himself. Perhaps their words could inspire these boys.

They came to Boys Town, a place where boys — whom no one else wanted — could find a home. These boys received an education at Boys Town, learned a trade and realized someone cared for them. They tried to live up to Father Flanagan's belief: "There is no such thing as a bad boy."

Flanagan, while the now world-famous village was still struggling to survive, championed his cause throughout the country. The Catholic priest, accompanied by the Boys Town band, often greeted sports stars at the railroad depot as they traveled through Nebraska to other locales. The greeting typically included an invitation to visit Boys Town during their layover in Omaha

Flanagan relied on a local public relations firm, Bozell and Jacobs, to find out

Boys At Heart

Visitors to Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, since it opened in 1917, includes a host of Hall of Famers and sports legends. They include:

Hank Aaron
Arthur Ashe
Ernie Banks
Rocky Bleier
James Braddock
Dick Butkus
Irv Cross
Dizzy Dean
Jack Dempsey (pictured at right)
Eric Dickerson
Mike Ditka
Julius Erving
Bob Feller
Vince Ferragamo
George Foreman
Joe Frazier
Lou Gehrig
Red Grange
Roosevelt Grier
Harlem Globetrotters
(1964, 1998)
Franco Harris
Gordie Howe
Keith Jackson
Michael Jordan
Joe Louis
Jim Kaat
Tom Landry
Mickey Mantle
Peyton Manning
Rocky Marciano
Jesse Owens
Rick Pitino
Branch Rickey
Phil Rizzuto
Oscar Robertson
Babe Ruth
Gale Sayers
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Ozzie Smith
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Joe Theismann
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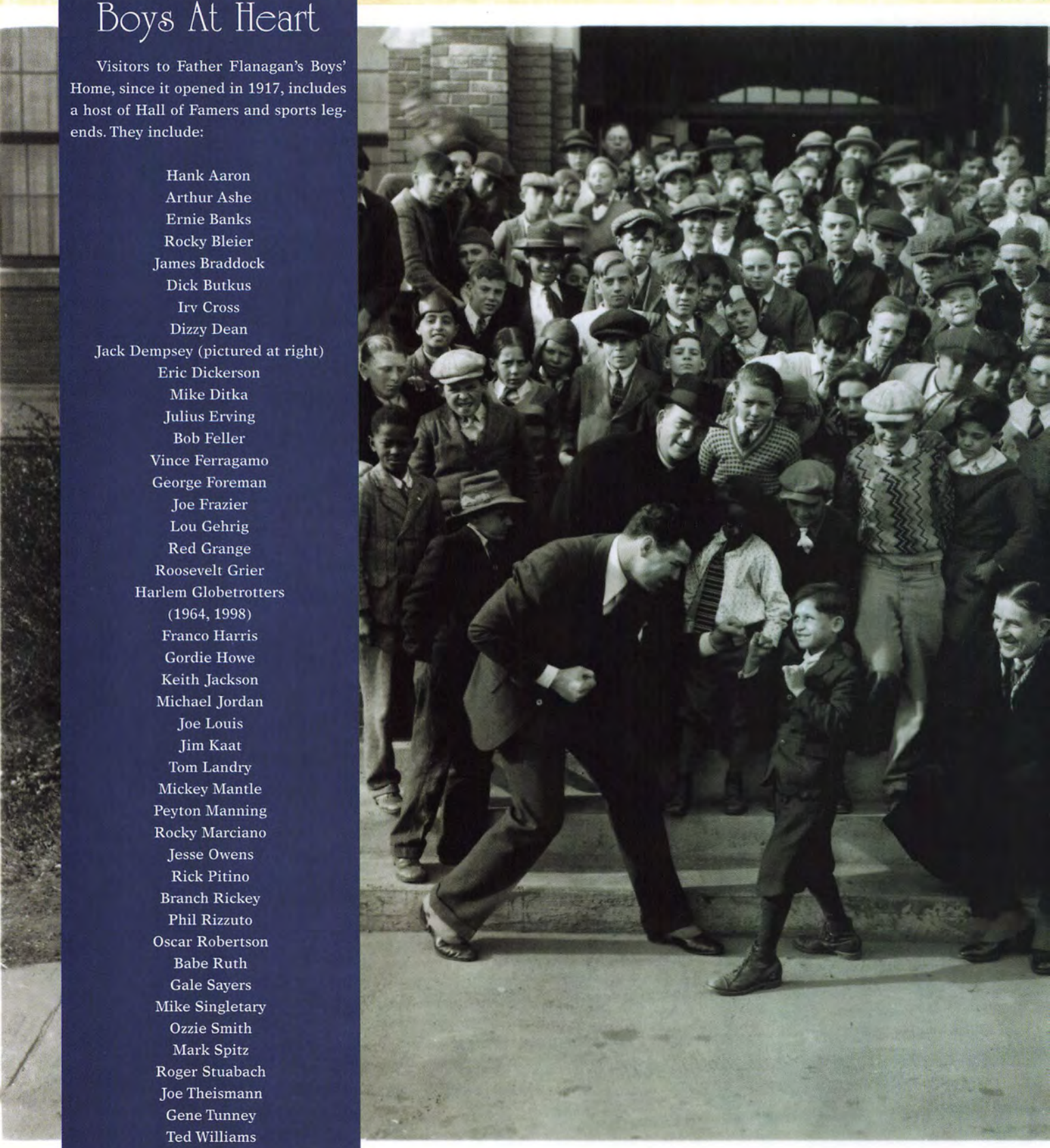
Ted Williams



who was coming through Omaha. Bozell, in turn, relied on its contacts in Hollywood and at the train stations.

It wasn't a hard sell, said Tom Lynch, director of the Boys Town Hall of History. "Father had such a great philosophy. He took in any boy regardless of race or religion."

And many sports celebrities accepted Flanagan's invitation. Red Grange visited Boys Town, as did Jack Dempsey, Rocky Marciano and Joe Louis. Jesse Owens served on the Boys Town Board of Directors, while Ruth financially supported Flanagan's cause and visited campus at least three times. The list goes on.

Each visit was somewhat the same. Sports celebrities were greeted with a welcoming ceremony, featuring the Boys Town band. Flanagan welcomed the guest; the Boys Town mayor made him an honorary citizen. Tours of the dormitories, career center and school followed. The guest usually addressed the boys, sharing words of inspiration and hope.

"Father Flanagan was ahead of his time," Lynch said. "He was very much a showman — all to get the word out about Boys Town."

Flanagan's goal was simple: He wanted people to visit Boys Town and witness his work. He wanted Boys Town to grow. "He felt if people came out and saw the work he was doing, they would be more likely to support his work," Lynch said.

The other benefit, Flanagan quickly realized, was that his boys — youngsters who had previously experienced few pleasures in life — would get to meet some of the world's best athletes.

People like Babe Ruth.

Ruth first visited Boys Town in November 1927 while he barnstormed the country following the 1927 World Series, which his Yankees won. Ruth, at age 32, was playing his best baseball. He hit .356 and 60 home runs and 164 RBI that year.

Ruth traveled with the Bustin' Babes; his teammate, Lou Gehrig, led the Larrupin' Lous. The teams, comprised of major leaguers, played throughout the country, often using local talent to fill out their rosters.

During his visit, Ruth told the Boys Town boys to never be ashamed of having been at Father Flanagan's Boys' Home. He previously had written Flanagan, promising to join the priest's fight against

Along with fellow Yankee great Gehrig, Ruth made his first visit to Boys Town following the epic 1927 60 home run season.

"profiteering in homeless boys."

Ruth kept in contact with his friend during the next two decades. He often sent him autographed baseballs, which Flanagan auctioned off.

Twenty years later, Ruth visited Boys Town for the last time. Lynch recently spoke with the women who served as Ruth's nurse during the trip to and from Omaha.

"She said he was very, very sick — almost on his deathbed," Lynch recalled. "But he insisted that he visit Boys Town one final time.

"She said it was his aim to see Boys Town one last time because of his relationship with Father Flanagan."

Greg Schwalenberg, curator at the Babe Ruth Museum and Birthplace in Baltimore, wasn't surprised to hear of Ruth's visit to Omaha, even though he was quite ill. Ruth never tired of visiting children in orphanages and hospitals. "He enjoyed making people feel good."

Just six weeks before he died, Ruth visited St. Mary's Industrial School, where he grew up, to present a trophy to a student-athlete. "I never heard that he canceled any visits before his death," Schwalenberg said. "He was still signing autographs in the hospital before he died."

Ernie Nicholas remembers the clothes Ruth wore during his visit to Boys Town in 1947: a camel hair coat, knickers and socks that nearly stretched to his knees. His shoes were two-tone and clean. "They were a great pair of shoes."

Ret. Col. Leo Magers, a 1948 graduate, remembers something else very distinct about Ruth: His voice. "He could hardly talk. His voice was almost like a whisper. They had to turn up the microphone so we could hear him." Magers later understood that Ruth's throat cancer made speaking difficult.

Dan Villegas, a 1951 graduate, shook Ruth's hand that day. "He said 'Hi son,' shook my hand and then patted my head."

"I didn't want to wash my hand."

Of course, he did. But the memories remain.

Ruth encouraged the boys to turn to athletics. Sports helped youngsters focus on positive things, he said, instead of leading them into mischief.

"It is a cinch that all who try to be ball players will not end up being ball players," Ruth told the boys. "Some might be lawyers, doctors and other things, but remember, in your youth you have worked the hardest. Get the best out of yourself."

Nicholas, a 1951 graduate, came away from Ruth's visit with more than two autographed baseballs. Ruth's words hit home.

"It made me think that if I worked hard and didn't get into any trouble, I could be a success too." ❖ NSA

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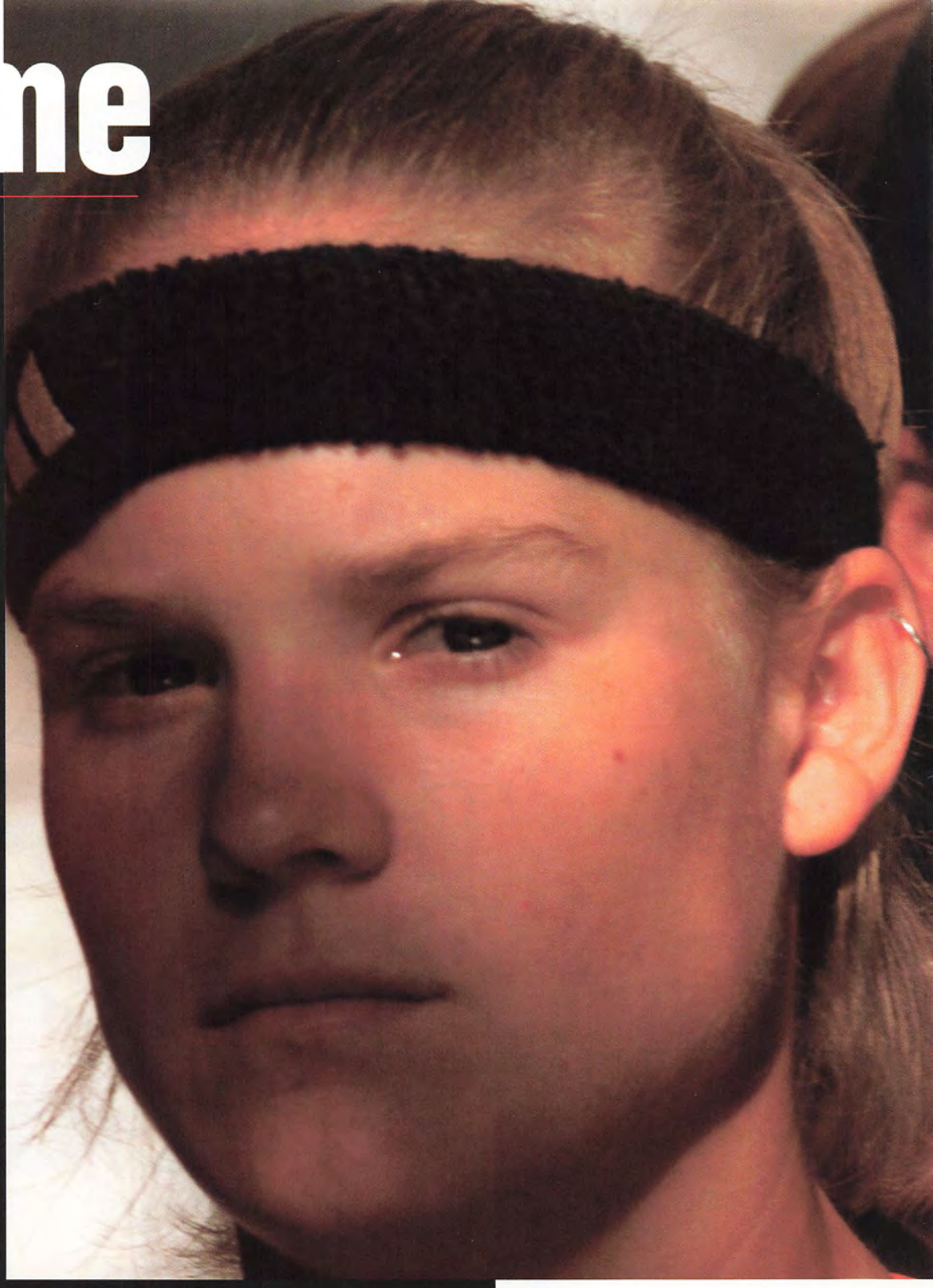

By Kalani Simpson

Nebraska softball stars Jennifer Lizama and Leigh Suhr are the roughest, toughest, meanest, most tenacious competitors you could hope to find ... and underneath that, two sweet young ladies

It is early, and the metamorphosis has begun. At team breakfast, Jennifer Lizama already is starting to marinate in it, stewing in her own competitive juices, starting the slow, steady transformation that will take her from pleasant, pretty college girl to stone cold killer.

Later, as she girds for battle, going through each individual pre-game routine, Lizama immerses deeper and deeper, losing herself in the moment. The headphones

she wears to block out the world help put the final touches on the mood, her music speaking to her, hardening her features, fortifying her heart.

"Their words inspire me to be the warrior I need to be out there," she explained.

Out there: A softball diamond. Warrior? Lizama, an All-American second baseman for Nebraska, can, at times, make Mean Joe Greene look like Martin Short. Need? Lizama has to compete, has to fight, like she has to breathe.

When Lizama first came to Nebraska as a freshman out of California, her teammates were startled at the change in intensity she underwent when it was time to play. "I never thought about it," she said. "My teammates told me about it, that thing about my face, my eyebrows."

Pure ferocity.

At bat, a look that would melt steel.

"That's what we call a Game Face," explained Husker Coach Rhonda Revelle.

A Game Face. Yes. Lizama can come up with one of those.

Blink. Taking a look at two pictures. Blink again. Shake head. Look again. Squint. Then look.

Those two can't possibly be the same person.

One picture is pure Leigh Suhr, the Huskers' sophomore shortstop and Nebraska high school softball legend. If looks could kill, Suhr would be serving 25-to-life. The photographer has captured her intensity perfectly; that is to say it looks like he probably has about another second and a half before Suhr — this is taken during softball practice after all — starts to hit him with a bat. Repeatedly. Hard.

Suhr subconsciously slips into Game Face any time she focuses on softball. This is Practice Face. And she means business with it.

"The more you look intense the more it helps," she said. "Now that I'm in college I'm just a little guy. I have to do whatever I can." Including looking as if she could, at any moment, storm over and start breaking legs? "I think that's the way it can come across," she allowed. "We're out there to win, not to make friends."

But it's the second picture that's the stunner. Nebraska softball's media guide, the caption says it's Leigh Suhr. Blonde. Sweet. Smiling.

Blink. Leigh Suhr? Leigh Suhr the softball player? Can't be. Can't be. Look at the first picture again. A shark with an infielder's glove. A killer. Even her hair is angry. Blink again. Now the other one. That can't be the same person. The faces are different. Not only in expression, mind you, but everything about the two pictures are two very different people. One is radiant. The other radioactive melt-down.

It can't be, can it?

But it is.

"I think sometimes women athletes spend a lot of time being misunderstood by some people," Revelle said. "You see them this way for games and you don't know they have a softer side."

Leigh Suhr's freshman bio in the Nebraska softball media guide. Favorite Movie: "Pretty Woman." Favorite Actress: Meg Ryan.

Pet Peeve: *When people assume.*

And they do. Suhr may have more than one side, but only one that she's famous

for. And when that's all people know about you, when that's all they see, when that's your most public persona, people do assume. Quick — word association — Leigh Suhr: "Intensity."

Even other athletes do it. Lizama tells the story of a woman from another sport at Nebraska who met her and was taken aback with pleasant surprise. Everybody on the athlete's team thought Lizama was just so mean, Lizama was told. People around campus, in the weight room, students seeing her frowning and stressed out on her way to class stay out of her way. She knows it. She notices.

Revelle does her best to fight the stereotype, puts together a conscious effort

Suhr, left, and Lizama *can* be sugar and spice and everything nice – off the field.

to show both sides. On the cover of 2000's media guide are Lizama and the Husker seniors, smiling and all dolled up in formal wear. Inside, the entire team is dressed in elegant black evening dresses, makeup to here, 16 belles of the ball. Knockouts. The coach wants her players to feel they don't have to give any of that up in order to play on her team. They can dress to kill, and then on game day they can, well, *really* dress to kill. Revelle said Lizama and Suhr, and the rest of her Huskers in heels as well, can be role models for girls, and women, too: "They show it's OK to be an athlete, it's OK to be competitive."

Not to worry. Forty pages later in the book, beside her bio, an action Lizama is giving a "don't mess with me" look that would make Sonny Liston cross the street. So much for Glamour Shots.

It's a look that lingers, that takes hold of the imagination.

"People expect me to be that way in person," Lizama said. "They expect me to be mean, and not a nice girl."

Just because she's got a Game Face? Just because she doesn't walk around smiling all the time? But she is nice, she said. ... When she doesn't have a bat in her hand. If she's not throwing you out or robbing you deep into the hole or stealing second or doing everything she possibly can to stomp your guts out for a Husker win. As long as you don't dare stand between her and home plate, she is a nice warrior ... er, girl.

"That's a different arena," Lizama said. "I'm not myself when I'm out there playing a game."

But then again maybe, a little, she is. It's just how she's always played, Lizama said. There is no option, she wouldn't know any other way. "My dad coached me and it was always like, 'Gotta be tough, gotta be tough.'" The Lizama on the field may be very different from the Lizama off the field, but it's still part of her, a David Banner existence: You wouldn't like me when I'm angry.

And she loves it that way.

You better believe she loves it. Suhr loves it. They all do. Intensity is, well, it's intense! Winning rocks! Dr. Jeckyl just never knew how to have this much fun with it. Mr. Hyde would have been All-Big 12.

"People don't expect women to play that way," Lizama said. "People tell me I play like a guy. Well what does a guy play like?"

Almost that hard.

Make no mistake. We have established that yes, Lizama and Suhr's cutthroat glares may be misleading. They can be perfectly cute and warm and fuzzy off the field. But on it? The eyes have it. They're pure nails.

They are the toughest, baddest, meanest competitors there are. And that's the only way they know how to operate. Once they don their Game Faces, softball ceases to be play time and becomes something very different, very personal. The change from co-ed to killer is total.

"We put eye black on, you know like what the football players wear? It's not for the sun. We wear it for night games, too," Lizama said. "It's to say we're going to war. You become a warrior."

Last year, Lizama had shoulder surgery before the season and never fully healed. Instead, she gritted her teeth through the year, playing every game, hitting .387 with 16 home runs, stealing 25 bases, refusing to let something as insignificant as injury get in the way.

"She has an incredible pain tolerance," Revelle said. During rehabilitation in order to get back on the field, "I've watched tears just roll down her eyes. But she never stopped working."

She always will have chronic pain, Lizama acknowledged. But the Face won't allow any of that. "In the midst of a game I don't notice really anything." Ignoring pain is natural, Lizama said, something she's always done. Just part of playing the game. Here's the competitor talking now: "It's just in your head."

Lizama, who Revelle said, "Told us, 'Climb on, let's go,'" at the end of last season is a threat to own several career Husker records in tangible statistical categories, as well as intensity, at the end of this, her senior season. She'll end up as an all-time great. But Suhr, perhaps one of the top three players ever to come out of the state, is walking in Lizama's footsteps. Saddled with the awesome responsibility of replacing Husker legend Ali Viola at short as a freshman last season, Suhr lived up to towering expectations in spurts, but also needed time for adjustment to the college game. Impossibly, in Division I "everyone was as intense as I am," she said.

Suhr soldiered through it, got hot at the end, and looks poised to become the player everyone knew she would be.

"She's a gamer," said Lizama, the ultimate authority. "Definitely."

Suhr has Lizama's style, intensity and traits in a younger, smaller, more speed-oriented package. She's not a home run hitter, but she's got all the tools, and then some. And two years from now? Will her considerable skills, boosted by her fierce competitiveness, yield Lizama-type results? "I look up to her, I'm sure she knows that," Suhr said of her double play combination across the bag. "I'd love to be as good as her."

She's already got the Game Face for it.

❖ NSA

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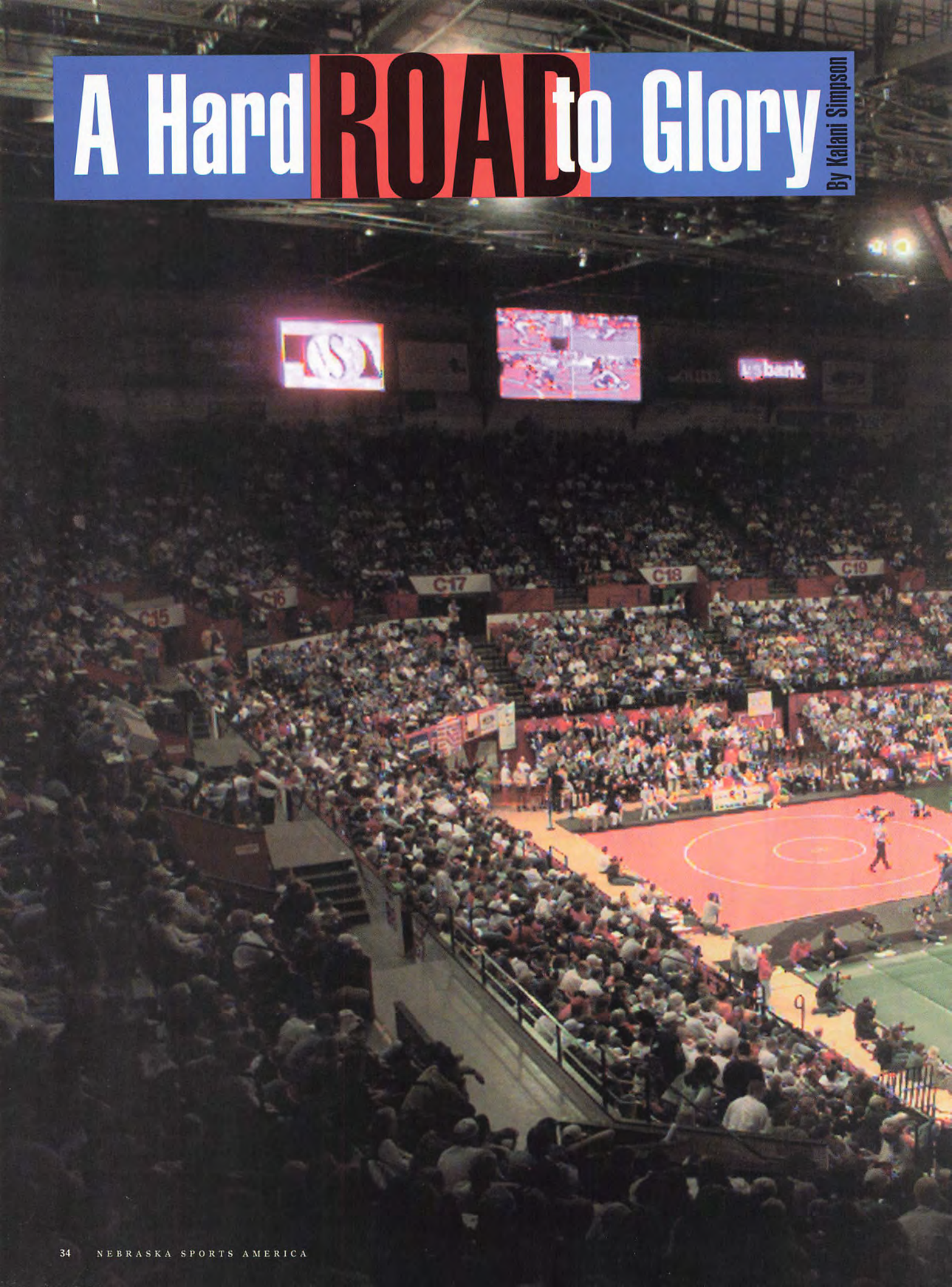
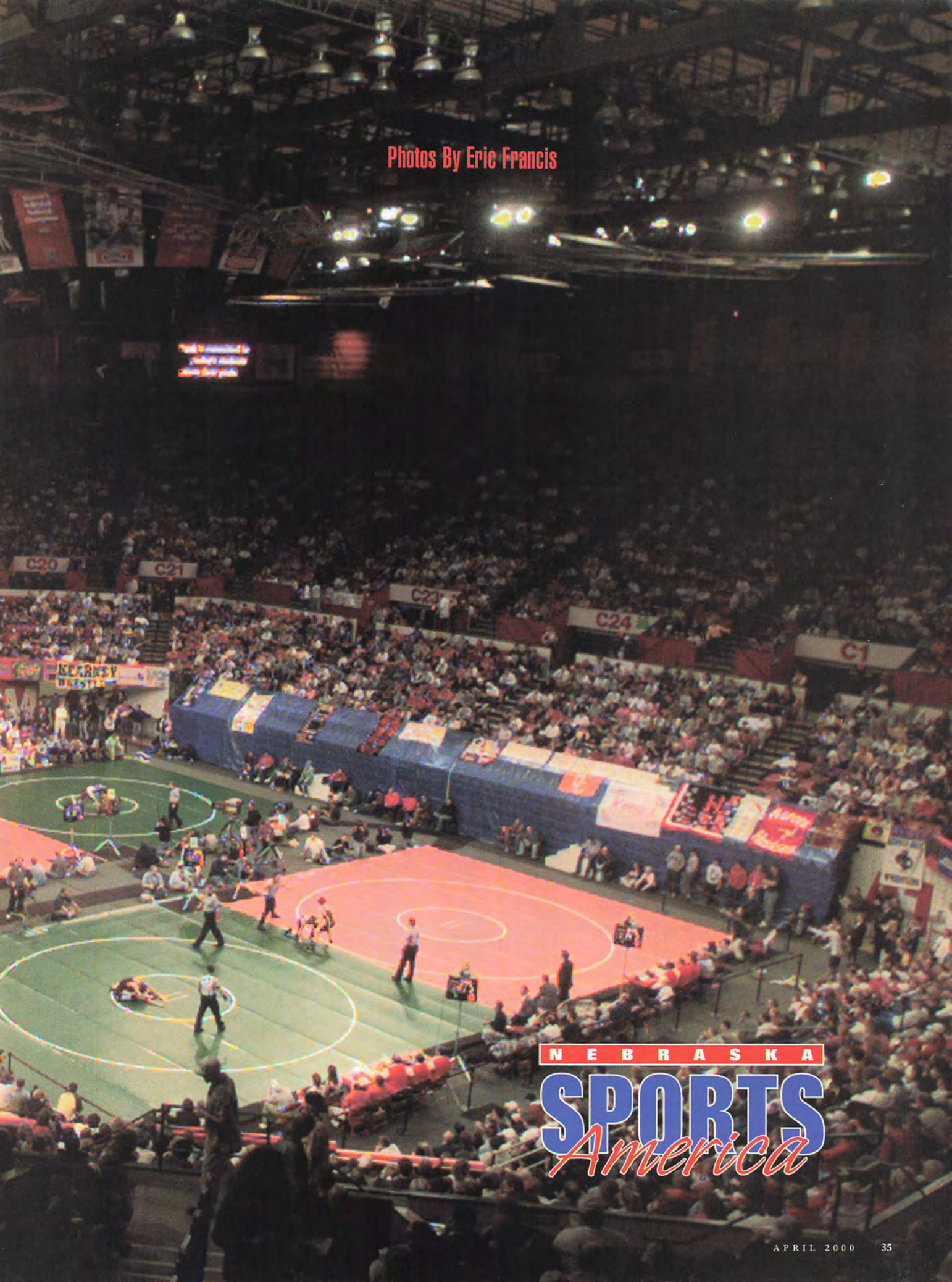
A Hard ROAD to Glory

By Kalani Simpson




Photos By Eric Francis
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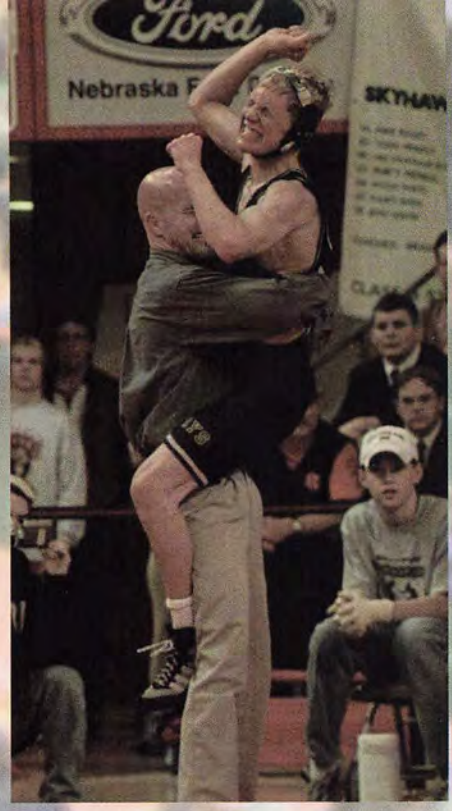
In the stands, on the mat, behind the scenes at the state wrestling tournament



Snowflakes...

***

Dyed hair.

Head phones.

Warm-up suits.

With the hoods turned up.

Meditating.

Pacing.

The thousand-yard stare.

Skin and bones.

Jump rope.

Eight mats.

Whistles.

Weigh-ins.

Announcements: "On deck, Mat No. 3, Class C 112-pounds, Robert Klein, Pender; Mickey Bergan, Stromsburg-Osceola. You're on deck!"

Looking down on it all.

A nervous dance.

Knee pads and tights.

Flash bulbs from above.

Applause.

Heartbreak.

Handshakes.

Head down.

Amherst Broncos. 215 Jock; 103 Logan; 275 Rex; 189 Nick; 171 Cody.

Keeping score.

Scribbling on the program.

Blood time ... and nose plugs.

Morrill Lions. Mitchell Tigers. Hebron Bears.

"He should've pinned 'em."

The flip.

Red wants down.

"Let's go! It's up here, Kurt! Let's go!"

"Wizzer! Get your wizzer in there!"

Ice cream for breakfast.

Nine a.m. nachos.

Red or Green.

Quick handshake.

Takedown! Two!

It happens quickly.

Minden Whippets for Greeley Bulldogs.

Ready with the rolled up towel: 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ...

Sprinting to the center circle.

Ankle bracelets first.

"Take him forward ... Pull back! Pull it back!"

Clock watching.

Time ticking.

Chances dwindling.

"High risk! You gotta go!

"There! There! There!"

Tears.

Of pain.

And joy.

Ankle bracelets first.

The hurt.

Delayed by another second.

Bending to remove the ankle bracelets.

Purple shoes.

Safety pins.

Head buried in a warmup jacket.

"Get ready for tomorrow."

Struggling to keep control.

Struggling to escape.

"You're going through the motions. You need to step it up. What are you saving it for? Huh? What for? You're being selfish."

Sweat.

Stretched muscles.

Visible tendons. (Ugh!)

Twisted shoulders.

Camcorders.

One coach with one wrestler on one mat, here.

The other with another wrestler at another mat, there.

Digging a chin into a back.

Strain.

"You ready?"

"There's points!"

Press pass on a T-shirt that reads: "Stanton Mom."

Warning Red! Warning!

Head in hands.

It all hits at once.

A year to think about it.

Or forever.

"A takedown in overtime. I'll tell you later."

One leaps.

One slumps.

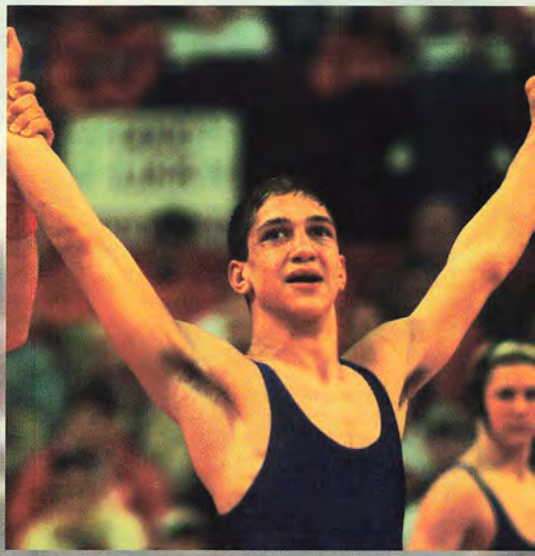
"That has no bearing on what happens this afternoon, right? You've got to stay focused."
Shoulder rub.
Stretching.
Getting psyched.
One foot to the other.
The caged tiger at the zoo.
"Wells, Gordon ... Schroeder, Gibbon. On deck."
About to be let out.
Clutching a newly injured elbow.
Hunching, lurching into the hallway.
Falling to the floor. Writhing.

The Despair. The pain.
Another wrestler steps over him.
(Front) Lil Cuz of...
Lil Sis of...
(Back) Kozicek 160.
Spitting in the trash can.
Almost. (Ewww!)
Slapping thighs.
Tying shoes for that extra second of rest.
An upset win.
Leaping. Fist pumping. Yes!
Only three people in the world (four, counting Mom) believed it was possible.
All that believing counted for something.
"Don't forget to sign the scorecard."
The waiting.
Descent into madness.
Pointing up to the stands.
Grandma pounding the seat.
Back points! Back points!
"AUGGGGHH!"
"What lost you the match?"
Gathering around the brackets and filling in your own.
Lying down in the back room. Sleeping. Waiting. Resting. Wrestling.
Desperately: "Oklahoma!"
Rubber gloves and sani-wipes.
Screams.

Mom freaks out.
A cell phone. Someone saw it on TV.
"Metzler's bleeding again."
Dan Alexander hanging around.
Four-time state champion.
Standing ovation.
Four-time state champion.
Standing ovation.
Four-time state champion.
Standing ovation.
Losing.
Disbelief.
Sinking in.
Bending down slowly. Ankle bracelets first.
It's over. It's all over.
Finality.
Family.
In the hallway again. It's all over.
"Well, he's ranked No. 1 in the country."
"You did good, son."
You did good.
You did good.

❖ NSA

From the stands, too.
"Watch your feet, keep your elbows down!"
Hanging on for a win.
Black eyes.
Photographers on the mat.
Wrestlebacks for points. Staying alive.
T2 E1 R2 N3.
Stalemate.
Smelling salts.
Theme from "Rocky."
Getting strong now!
The Parade of Champions.
Goose bumps.
A section stands as one, jumping.



SEEDS of excellence

BY DR. SHAWN M. SCHMIDT

Local Racer Becomes Nebraska Outlaw

In a fast-paced sport where the fan base is loyal and slinging mud is a byproduct, the name Bill Robertson is well recognized.

Racing sprint cars, an extremely competitive and high-powered sport, Robertson has excelled. His skills have propelled him into the national spotlight and the World of Outlaws sprint car circuit, joining the ranks of famous (to Outlaws aficionados) names such as Kinser and Wolfgang.

Catching the eye of a local businessman and entrepreneur, Robertson currently finds himself a full-time professional racer for Jim and Connie Eckley, owners of the Eckley Racing Team, of Mead, Neb.

Robertson explained: "A good driver must have a good team and team owner behind him. Jim and Connie have been great to me."

A Lincoln native, Robertson was born into a racing family. His father, Jim, raced sprint cars during the 1970s and grandfather, Burke, raced during the early '50s to '60s. In addition, Robertson's brother, Scott, races sprint cars.

Strong out of the gate in '95, Robertson proved he had the competitive spirit. He would win several races and receive rookie-of-the-year awards at two local tracks. The 1996 season would produce similar results.

For Robertson (16), mud slinging isn't a bad thing.

Robertson would compete in 47 races during the 1997 season. Earning 34 top 10 finishes. Making the difficult leap to the Outlaws circuit for six events he performed well on the nationally heralded circuit.

The '98 season was marred by two concussions and two broken arms in two accidents. He still earned a single top 10 finish in the Outlaws. Additionally, Robertson earned 25 top 10 finishes, five top five finishes in the NCRA division, finished third in points and was named Rookie of the Year.

On the mend, the '99 season saw Robertson's 68 races produce a fruitful 28 top 10s, 13 top five finishes and four wins in regional races. Entering 25 Outlaw events, he finished respectively well.

NATCO, a national truck Brokerage Company and Scoco Supply Inc. specializing in equipment fittings will sponsor Robertson in his sixth year of racing. He plans to compete in about 50 World of Outlaws races and various other regional events.

Robertson said, "I love sprint cars, the challenge, the big tires and the big engines. The things you liked about cars when you were a child are the same things as you grow up. Why else would you bang your head night after night?

"It takes great dedication and a strong mind to keep from losing your marbles when you struggle in one race, recover and put out a full effort for the next race. You must be in good physical shape and rely on your instincts to free up your thinking process. Set everything aside, and turn on a 100 percent aggressive attitude."

In a sport he has grown to love, Robertson is committed to compete for another 10 years. The Nebraska Outlaw's lifetime racing goal is to win the Knoxville Nationals, considered the Indy 500 event for sprint drivers. ❖ NSA

Dr. Shawn M. Schmidt is an Omaha chiropractic physician and professional race driver.

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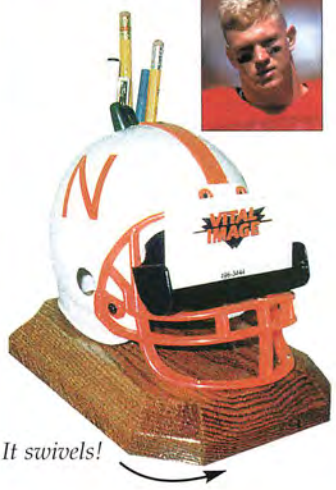

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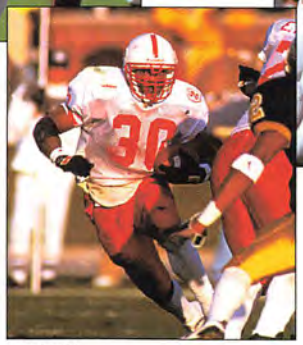

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IN the stands WITH TERRY L. HENION

Nebraska Gringos Cast Away for Bass

When the big fish struck, I was watching a man and his son aboard a burro wind their way down a steep mountain path.

But that is when the bruisers that haunt the world's most revered largemouth bass lake — legendary Lake Baccarac in southwest Mexico — always seem to attack. When the fisherman least expects it. But more about that later...

The lake, about 25 miles long and five miles wide, is located some 150 miles northwest of Mazatlan, in the southwest part of the country, about 100 miles inland from the Gulf of California. It was stocked with Florida-strain bass in 1978 and since then has been the Mecca for serious bass fisherman.

To put it in perspective, an average "yearling" bass in the Midwest is about eight inches long. At Baccarac, the average yearling bucketmouth weighs about three pounds.

My fishing partner Jerry Fansler of Omaha and I had planned the trip for months. And finally, in the first week of February, there we were on Lake Baccarac. No more than 32 anglers are ever allowed on the lake at any one time. During our stay, there were about 14 fishermen at the lodge, most of whom were Texas oilmen. One of the Texans, a robust freckled guy nicknamed Spot, sized us up the first night.

"Nebraskans, huh? Well, here's the deal, boys...," he said, grinning. "If y'all don't bring up football, we won't either."

Fair enough.

Football, though, did come up. Among the fishermen at Baccarac during our stay was Ed Marinaro, the former Cornell all-America and Minnesota Vikings' running back who finished second in the Heisman balloting behind Pat Sullivan in 1971. Marinaro later earned fame as an actor on the acclaimed TV series "Hill Street Blues," and is still seen in made-for-television movies.

For the record, we had come looking for "lobina boca grande" (a BIG largemouth bass). That translates to a fish of at least 9 or 10 pounds.

And, again for the record, Jerry caught a fish that weighed just more than 9 pounds. I caught one over 7, a couple over 6 and a few over 5. But it was the "grandes" that got away we will remember.

Jerry was the first to encounter a BIG fish. Something inhaled his 10-inch plastic worm and dove for the bottom. His rod made an ominous bow.

He clenched down hard on his cigar and muttered, "This is a big fish..." And just as quickly, the line went slack and the bruiser was gone. I chuckled. I should have kept quiet.

Awhile later, I was bouncing a small surface bait across the water near some flooded trees. I saw two men on burros on the mountainside and they drew my attention. Suddenly, it sounded as if someone had dropped the engine from a John Deere tractor into the lake. A huge dirigible-shaped fish catapulted itself completely out of the water, my lure firmly hooked in its mouth. At the apex of its leap, the bass turned nose-first toward the water and did a credible Greg Louganis imitation. And, of course, once it was back in the water, it headed for the nearest tree.

In the background, I could hear Blas, our guide, saying, "Nonononononono..." The bass reached the tree but somehow I managed to haul her back into open water. Then, again, the line went slack. She, too, was gone.

"Grande ... pootie," Blas said. That just about covered it.

I looked at him and asked, "Ocho?"

Blas pondered for a second and replied, "No, 'nueve' ... maybe 'deis.'"

He was telling me that the lost fish weighed at least 9 pounds and probably 10. It was what I had come for, and now it was gone.

"'Deis? Come on, Blas, that was more like 'ocho,'" I said.

"'Deis,'" he said, nodding firmly.

That is what Baccarac does to you. You barter down the size of a lost grande so as not to feel as bad.

Marinaro managed to land a "grande." He had laid down his rod after making a cast and the big fish struck immediately. The rod went sailing and Marinaro made a desperate lunge, tackling the rod and holding it to his chest like an old woman clinging to a purse. Somehow, he managed to bring in the 9-pounder.

All in all, it was a memorable trip. Even despite the rooster next door to the lodge that crowed at the crack of midnight.

"Couple of years ago, one ol' boy went over there and offered the man a hundred bucks for that rooster so he could get some sleep," Spot said. "He wrung the damn thing's neck. Within an hour, the guy next door had another rooster out there."

Gringo bass fishermen, it seems, are easier to hook than "lobina boca grande." ❖ NSA

Terry Henion is a longtime sportswriter who has worked for the Omaha World-Herald, Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph and the Hastings Tribune.

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VIEWPOINT

Altman is as good as it gets

Is there a better college basketball coach in the country than Creighton's Dana Altman?

It would be awfully hard to come up with one. There are dozens of extremely successful and very talented coaches at the Division I level alone, and coaches at lower levels of play overcome more obstacles on the road to success.

But no coach does it better than Altman. He has skippered Creighton back into the NCAA tournament for a second straight year and continued CU's steady improvement in the win column. Every year since Altman came to Creighton, the Jays have won more games. Monday's whipping of Southwest Missouri State in the Missouri Valley

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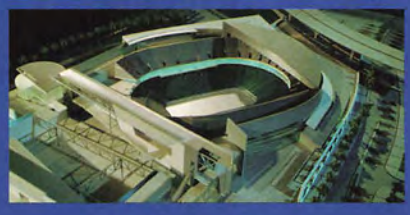

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